# CHANGING THE STATUS QUO: THE UNITED NATIONS' WORK FOR WOMEN

*"What is now needed is the political will... The strategy for the advancement of women seeks first and foremost to alter the current unequal conditions and structures that continue to define women as secondary persons and give women's issues a low priority. Development should now move to another plane in which women's pivotal role in society is recognized and given its true value."*

*The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women*

Cultural beliefs and traditional prejudices, often reinforced by laws, have hindered progress in improving the status of women and undermined their fundamental human rights. Discrimination against women and failure to recognize the value of their contributions to society have been common, both in developing and industrialized countries.

The United Nations has initiated change in this situation. By adopting international instruments which specifically aim to improve the status of women, the UN has established standards for measuring how far societies have progressed in ensuring equality between women and men. By focusing the attention of governments, academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals on the reality of women's lives, the UN has helped force a recognition of women's contributions. This recognition empowers women and allows them to take their place as equals with men.

## EQUALITY: A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

In 1945 women enjoyed the right to vote in only 31 countries but the Preamble of the *United Nations Charter*, adopted that year, declared the faith of the world's peoples in "fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small...." Article 1 of the Charter specifies that one of the purposes of the Organization is "to achieve international cooperation in... promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion." Articles 55 and 75 go on to reinforce explicitly the notion of equality of the sexes.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, reaffirmed the conviction of the international community to respect the equality of all human beings, regardless of gender. The *International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* and on *Civil and Political Rights* adopted in 1966 seek to guarantee the rights enumerated in their provisions for men and women. And in December 1979, the General Assembly adopted the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, a legally binding international agreement which commits States parties to take "appropriate measures to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men." More than 100 countries have ratified the Convention, committing themselves to put its provisions into practice .

## DISCRIMINATION: A DEFINITION

The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, adopted by the General Assembly in 1979 and in force since 1981, defines discrimination against women as: " ...any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the

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political, economic, social, cultural, civil or other field."

The 1979 Convention was drafted by the Commission on the Status of Women, one of the first bodies established by the Economic and Social Council in 1945. The Commission prepares reports and recommendations on women's rights and has drafted the following international instruments aimed at defining and guaranteeing women's equality with men in a number of fields:

- *The Convention on the Political Rights of Women*, 1952
- *The Convention on the Nationality of Married Women*, 1957
- *The Convention on the Recovery Abroad of Maintenance*, 1956
- *The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages*, 1962

The Commission on the Status of Women has a broad mandate, while the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, a treaty body, monitors compliance with the 1979 Convention. Both these bodies are served by the Division for the Advancement of Women, which conducts research and prepares background papers and drafts for consideration by the deliberative bodies.

In 1991 the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women called for an evaluation of the domestic work of women, and recommended that that value be added to the gross national product of a country. The Committee's 23 experts also recommended that women working in family enterprises be guaranteed salary, social security and social benefits.

## A YEAR AND A DECADE FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

The global movement to achieve women's equality received an important boost when the General Assembly declared 1975 as **International Women's Year**. Organized around the theme Equality, Development and Peace (with sub-themes of employment, health and education), the Year saw a major UN Conference held in Mexico City and adoption by the General Assembly of a Plan of Action which stressed States' responsibilities for improving the status of women. The Plan of Action became the blueprint for action by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments and international organizations during the years 1976-1985, which the General Assembly designated the **United Nations Decade for Women**.

The Year and the Decade put the issues of women's equality, their integration in the development process and their role in the promotion of peace firmly on the global agenda. "It was the start of an international effort to right the wrongs of history", according to the *State of the World's Women* report prepared for the 1985 World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the Decade for Women.

The World Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya, drew some 16,000 government delegates and representatives of NGOs from all over the world. The governments attending adopted the *Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women*, the blueprint for women's future everywhere. In addition to identifying the obstacles facing women in general, and the approaches needed to overcome them, the *Strategies* include special measures for disadvantaged women such as refugees, the destitute and the abused. The 372 paragraphs of the Forward-looking Strategies address the entire spectrum of women's participation in society. They urge governments that have not yet done so to ratify the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* and to:

- intensify efforts to ensure equality of participation by women in the political life of their countries at all levels and in all branches of government;
- take legislative and other measures to eliminate discrimination against women in employment opportunities and create new ones;
- take special measures to revise and adapt women's education to the realities of the developing world;
- eliminate gender stereotypes and revise the school curricula and training for women, linking them to future employment needs;

➤ recognize women's contributions in agriculture and secure their access to land, capital, technology and other resources.

In addition to legislation, the *Strategies* urge that society's formal and informal institutions, including media, educational institutions, political parties, executive bodies and NGOs, be enlisted in the effort to remove obstacles created by stereotypes and social perceptions.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT + ACTION = EQUALITY**

One of the most important results of the Women's Decade was the data collected on the role and contribution of women in all spheres of economic and social activity. The International Year and the Decade prompted extensive research by the UN system, governments, NGOs and academic communities, which provided solid information for planning and action to achieve progress in the areas covered by the Decade's themes and sub-themes: equality, development and peace; and employment, health and education. As the *Forward-looking Strategies* point out: "Timely and reliable statistics on the situation of women have an important role to play in the elimination of stereotypes and the movement towards full equality."

The availability of reliable statistics and other concrete evidence enables—or forces—governments, institutions and individuals to recognize and measure women's contributions. They also permit assessment of the harmful consequences of unequal or discriminatory laws and practices.

**THE CASE FOR STATISTICS**

➤ Worldwide, women produce more than 50 per cent of the food, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In Africa, women make up 80 per cent of the food producers in some countries.

➤ In 1990, 828 million women were economically active, according to official estimates.

Before the Women's Decade, statistics on women's contributions were meagre. A 1970 census in Egypt, for example, identified women as doing only 3.6 per cent of the agricultural work. Investigations later revealed, however, that in the south of the country half the married women plough and level the land, and between 35 and 70 per cent are involved in planting, tilling and harvesting.

A UN official frequently tells of a female Programme Director of a women's division in an Asian country. The Agriculture Ministry had received praise for a programme which trained several thousand persons per year. The Director looked into it more carefully and saw that not one of the trainees was a woman. In response to her pressure and questions, Ministry officials explained that women were not interested in agricultural training and that it would be very difficult and inappropriate to organize efforts to train women. The official of the women's division did not believe this. She began a small-scale programme in which 250 women were trained over a two-year period. More women requested training than could be accommodated in such a small-scale effort.

Here, statistics on women's work in agriculture, coupled with a statistic on women benefiting from a training opportunity (zero), led to a programme which helped make the women of the country more productive.

The United Nations has been instrumental in improving statistics on the situation of women. The Statistics Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Development (DESD), the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the United Nations regional economic and social commissions are in the forefront of efforts to improve statistics on women in several countries.

The United Nations Statistical Division has produced the most comprehensive and authoritative source of statistics on women worldwide—the United Nations Women's Indicators and Statistics Database for Microcomputers (Wistat). This machine-readable database is unique in that it covers in detail nearly all countries and areas of the world, and most fields of social and related statistics.

The United Nations Statistical Office, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Devel-

opment and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) assist countries in improving their capability to develop and disseminate statistics on women. Their assistance seeks to expand the basic data available in national statistical services by improving links between users and producers of women's statistics. UN projects are under way in Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Kenya and Pakistan.

**WHAT THE PICTURE SHOWS:**

***Work***

*The World's Women 1970-1990: Trends and Statistics*, a landmark UN study called for by the Nairobi conference, cites several statistics on women's participation in the world of work. The numbers reveal that:

➤ Women make up one third of the official labour force. But the real share of women in the labour force is equal to or greater than men's, when women's unpaid work in agriculture, household and family care is fully taken into account.

➤ It is estimated that unpaid household work by women, if properly evaluated, would add a third to global production.

➤ Time-use statistics considering all work—paid and unpaid—reveal that, worldwide, women spend more of their time working than men, except in North America and Australia, where the hours are almost equal.

➤ Everywhere, women are paid less than men. Women receive, for the same kind of work, 30 to 40 per cent less pay on average worldwide.

***Health***

➤ The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF have focused on women as the anchor of their development strategies. Women are central to improving the health of their communities. WHO estimates, for example, that 80 per cent of all illness can be traced to lack of clean drinking water and sanitation. Some 25 per cent of the urban population and 71 per cent of country dwellers in developing countries are without safe potable water; nearly half of town dwellers and more than 85 per cent of rural people have inadequate sanitation.

➤ Women often have to walk long distances to fetch water. A person needs about 5 litres (2.5 gallons) of water a day for cooking and drinking, and a further 25 to 45 litres to stay clean and healthy. The most a woman can comfortably carry is 15 litres. Even if she lives near a standpipe, she may have to make 15 journeys a day with a full bucket to keep a family of five in good health. Many countries are now making a special effort to look into women's particular needs in their attempts to meet the targets of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1980-1990).

***Nutrition***

➤ Girls in developing countries are over four times as likely as boys to suffer from malnutrition. Research in one Asian country found that boys under five years of age received 16 per cent more food than girls and that girls were more likely to suffer in times of famine. According to the *State of the World's Women 1985* report, 50 countries have begun nutrition programmes—and half have developed them especially for women.

***Education***

➤ Worldwide, there are more women illiterates than men—the proportion is around three to two. Better education for women has an important magnifier effect. It may mean better employment for women and higher income for the family. Educated women can take better care of their families, including the educational and nutritional needs of the children. Education and higher employment lead to declines in fertility. A recent study of four Latin American countries concluded that education was responsible for between 40 and 60 per cent of the decline in fertility in the last decade. A study of Nigerian villages found that mothers' education alone was associated with 20 per cent fewer child deaths.

***Family Roles***

➤ Traditional male/female roles are no longer the reality for at least one third of the world: an estimated one third of the world's households are headed by women. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa,

the proportion rises to 45 per cent, and in Caribbean countries to as much as 50 per cent.

➤ One statistic in particular is a graphic reminder of the unique role of women in society: 93 million children are born each year. The *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women* stresses "a proper understanding of maternity as a social function" as well as the shared responsibility of men and women for raising their families and the prevention of discrimination against women on the grounds of marriage and maternity.

***Media***

➤ Women are disproportionately excluded from key decision-making posts in the media, notes the 1989 *World Communications Report* by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO country studies show that women are a minority in the "man's world" of the media. Women's representation is especially low in technical jobs and senior management positions.

***Politics***

➤ In August 1991, only eight of the then 159 UN Member States had a woman head of State or Government: Bangladesh, Dominica, France, Iceland, Ireland, Nicaragua, Norway and the Philippines; since then the number has declined. Women are also poorly represented at the ministerial level: only 4.1 per cent of the world's cabinet ministers were women in 1990, and 77 countries still had no women ministers. Most women ministers head ministries such as education, culture, social welfare and women's affairs.

**DEVELOPMENT: INVESTING IN WOMEN**

In its report *Investing in Women*, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) recognizes that "everywhere in the world women have two jobs--around the home and outside it", and that women are at the heart of development. They control most of the non-money economy: subsistence agriculture, bearing and raising children, and domestic labour. They also play an important part in the money economy, through trading entrepreneurship in the "informal sector," and as wage earners. In view of their crucial role in development, any investment in women and enhancement of their opportunities may have many positive effects.

*Investing in women* gives a high economic return, UNFPA argues: "the return will be an approach to development which will make the most effective use of the world's limited resources; slower, more balanced growth in the labour force; security for the family; and—most important—the possibility of better health, education, nutrition and personal development not only for women but for all people."

The United Nations has increasingly focused its efforts on promoting the integration of women into the development process. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was established in 1976 to provide direct financial and technical support to poor women in developing countries, who are striving to raise their living standards. UNIFEM works in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), governments and non-governmental organizations. Other parts of the UN system, including regional commissions and specialized agencies also cooperate in UNIFEM-supported projects. Below are examples of the Fund's 750 projects in more than 100 countries:

➤ In the northern Mexican county of Tempoal, women have been trained as mechanics to build hand-operated water pumps. The project has grown from workshop to factory scale, employing 250 women in the production of 5,000 units a year. The availability of low-cost handpumps has greatly reduced the hours which many thousands of poor Mexican women spend collecting and carting water each day, while improving water quality and the health of those who drink it.

➤ In Mali, previously unemployed university graduates received training, equipment and credit in 1988 to establish a waste disposal business in the capital city, Bamako. The business has prospered and currently provides garbage removal services for 18,000 residents. The graduates have produced training materials on sanitation and family health, and established a fund for setting up other enterprises.

In addition, the United Nations Development Programme itself and United Nations agencies such as the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are involved in improving the lives of women.

## PEACE AT HOME AND ABROAD

The *Forward-looking Strategies* calls on women to support efforts towards disarmament and confidence-building measures between countries and peoples. But it stresses that "women's equal role in decision-making with regard to peace and related issues should be seen as one of the basic human rights, and as such, should be enhanced and encouraged at the national, regional and international levels".

➤ Women are rarely seen in top decision-making positions. In 1989, for example, women held only 12 per cent of seats in national parliaments. Women make up less than 5 per cent of the world's heads of State and Government, heads of major corporations and top positions in international organizations.

Women, the *Forward-looking Strategies* points out, are among the most vulnerable groups in conflicts, and suffer from domestic violence. They have a special interest in promoting peace, compassion and tolerance in their own society and in the world community. Three aspects of women's role in fostering the development of peace are emphasized in the *Strategies*:

➤ reducing the suffering they experience as a result of all forms of violence;

➤ increasing their participation in peace-making efforts now; and

➤ recognizing their role—along with men—in preparing future generations for life in the world community.

## WHAT NEXT?

The "scales of world equality" slowly started to right themselves during the women's decade:

➤ The world adult female literacy rate increased from 55 per cent in 1960 to 66 per cent in 1990;

➤ The absolute number of women in the labour force increased from an estimated 34 per cent in 1950 to an estimated 36 per cent in 1990;

➤ The use of modern family planning techniques in developing countries grew from 10 per cent of married couples in the 1960s to 51 per cent in 1991.

While these trends may be positive, they are not enough; further efforts are needed. UNFPA has, for instance, recommended that all countries review the legal system to remove barriers to women's full participation in society. The General Assembly has called on States to establish specific targets to increase the presence of women in professional, management and decision-making positions.

All such issues will be discussed at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing, China in September 1995. The Conference is expected to be a forum for the exchange of national experience and to focus world-wide attention on the advancement of women. Many countries have stated that the Conference should be geared towards action and should formulate guidelines for specific activities.

For action is what is needed to redress the current situation. In the words of the former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Department of Public Information, Mrs. Thérèse P. Sévigny, "... the international plans and legal instruments are in place. All that remains to be done is to implement them, to put the principles into practice".

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